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ABSTRACT

Rating scales were developed and applied to evaluate deferential/nondeferential language users. Participants were 1,262 college students in small discussion groups containing two experimenter's confederates who used either deferential or nondeferential language. The characteristics of deferential language users were questioning/tentative behavior, polite commands, requests, absence of coarse language, less interruptive behavior, and use of qualifiers and apologetic phrases. The results demonstrated that raters' perceptions of deferential/nondeferential language styles differed according to the sex of the rater. Both male and female raters perceived deferential language users as more submissive, less assertive, less willing to take a stand, and more caring. But the men perceived deferential language users as friendlier, while the women perceived deferential language users as more sincere and more honest. The men also were more willing than women to share the opinions of the deferential language users. The ten scales that contributed significantly to predicting deferential language usage seemed to fall into three categories: individual power, personal warmth, and believability. Raters also seemed to associate deferential language with femininity, but the most powerful scales seemed to be individual power and personal growth. (RI)

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DIFFERENCES IN SUBJECTS' PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER AND BELIEVABILITY BETWEEN USERS OF DEFERENTIAL AND NON-DEFERENTIAL LANGUAGE

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DIFFERENCES IN SUBJECTS' PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER AND BELIEVABILITY BETWEEN USERS OF DEFERENTIAL AND NON-DEFERENTIAL LANGUAGE

Considerable amount of attention has been focused on language style as one specific instance reflecting general behavioral differences found between men and women. Behaviorally, women are typically characterized as more submissive, more susceptible to social pressure and more responsive to the needs of others, whereas the opposite is true for men (Shuy, 1969; Strainchamps, 1971; Bem, 1974, Kramer, 1974, 1975; Markel, Long and Saine, 1976). Consequently, as language style is presumed to reflect these general behavioral differences, it has been argued that differences in language style allow raters to identify reliably the sex of the speaker. Moreover, if they identify the speaker to be a woman, they then perceive her to be less believable (Strodtbeck and Mann, 1956; Bostrom and Kemp, 1969; Thorne and Henley, 1975; Parlee, 1979).

These assumptions which serve as bases for much current and continuing research on women's language have been derived from introspection (Lakoff, 1973, 1974, 1975), personal observation (Lakoff, 1975; Parlee, 1979), and some empirical verification (Key, 1972; Cronch and DuBois, 1973; Kramer, 1974; DuBois and Cronch, 1974; Mischel, 1974; Bordon, 1974, Mulac and Lundell, 1977; Berryman and Wilcox, 1980). We argue that there is a clear need for more systematic research directed at explaining some of the effects and correlates of these assumptions. A primary purpose of this study is to contribute to that endeavor.

Lakoff (1973, 1974, 1975) has identified a set of language characteristics that are used by women: speaking more frequently, being interrupted more frequently, using more tag questions, using more "wh" imperative constructions, avoiding coarse language and expletives, more frequently posing

questions rather than making statements, using more qualifiers, using more apologies, more polite commands, and using more modal construction (can, may, would, should and ought). After examining these characteristics, it became clear to us that they belong to a broader language category not limited by sex or speaker. Clearly, actual interaction is complicated by factors such as status, power, context, prior interaction, and relationship between the participants, etc. We have adopted the term deferential language to refer to the characteristics listed above as they occur in actual interaction.

Our primary interest is in determining whether these hypothesized constituents of deferential language do, in fact, cause users of such language to be perceived as more submissive, less assertive and consequently less believable. Secondly, we are interested in determining whether the use of deferential language is perceived as a feminine characteristic as Robin Lakoff (1973, 1974, 1975) has speculated. Somewhat incidentally, we want to see if men and women perceive deferential language differently.

This study manipulates the characteristics associated with deferential language in such a way as to address the following questions that we see as central to developing a conceptualization of deferential language use and its effects:

(1) What characteristics do raters attribute to deferential language users?

(2) To what extent do raters discriminate on feminine/masculine scales between those who do/do not use deferential language?

(3) To what extent do raters discriminate on believability scales between those who use these two styles?

(4) To what extent do raters' perceptions of deferential language users depend on the sex of the rater?

Procedure

In this section we will discuss manipulation of deferential language styles, development of the measurement instrument, subject selection and the administration of the measurement instrument.

Manipulation of Deference

Two hundred students enrolled in basic courses in public speaking and small group communication at University of California, Davis, were asked to give their opinions on and degree of interest in 39 current issues.

Criteria for selecting issues were (1) evidence of highest degree of interest to both male and female raters, and (2) evidence of opinions clustered around the neutral point. Three issues met the criteria for inclusion in this study. Those three issues were abortion, job placement, and solar energy. We chose multiple issues so as to provide a replication to test the generalizability of our results.

We then wrote a script of a group discussion with four participants for each of the three issues selected. Each script was written so that one deferential language user and one non-deferential language user advocated each side of each issue.

The characteristics used by deferential language users were: question marks to indicate rising inflection and tentativeness, tag questions, "wh" imperatives, polite commands, requests, absence of coarse language, lower frequency of interrupting, use of apologetic phrases, use of modal construction, and use of qualifiers. We attempted to make the amount and degree of deference exhibited by participants consistent in all three scripts.

We chose 23 scales to be used in rating the fictitious participants in the discussion. Sixteen scales were designed to test the extent to which raters perceived each "participant" to be believable. The first seven of these scales were of the format of Triandus' Behavioral Differential and

nine were of the semantic differential type. These scales were selected from sets of scales designed to measure general interpersonal evaluation and believability. They were selected because they have demonstrated some stability over topics, situations, speakers and raters (Cronkhite, 1977; Liska, 1978).

Seven semantic differential scales were based on items chosen from Bem's (1974) Sex Role Inventory to obtain rater judgments of each participant in terms of their femininity/masculinity. We selected scales from Bem's SRI that seemed consistent with stereotypical perception of femininity and masculinity. Two of these scales (dominant/submissive, assertive/non-assertive) were selected as a validity check to determine the extent to which we were successful in representing deferential/non-deferential language styles.

The test booklet for each of the three issues consisted of a cover page detailing the instructions for completing the booklet, a written script of four participants discussing one of the three issues, and four sets of 23 scales--one set of scales for rating each "participant" (see Appendix A).

Subjects and Administration

Subjects were 1262 undergraduate students (650 males, 612 females) enrolled in a variety of communication courses in the Department of Rhetoric at the University of California at Davis, and in the Department of Communication at California State University, San Jose. Approximately one-third of the total number of subjects rated the "participants" in each discussion. Subjects read the instructions and the script of the discussion before rating the four "participants" on the twenty-three scales.

Data Analysis

Basically, we wanted to know on which of the scales raters were differentiating between deferential and non-deferential language users. To provide

that information we chose to use direct and stepwise discriminant analysis. Five discriminant analyses employing a direct solution were used to determine the extent to which raters' perceptions of deferential language differed depending upon the issue or sex of the raters.

In each discriminant analysis the data were cast into two groups for which a discriminant function was determined: group 1 consisted of all ratings of non-deferential language passages, and group 2 consisted of all ratings of deferential language passages.

In the case of the direct discriminant analyses, standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients were used as indices of the comparative importance of the scales to the discriminant function. Means were also calculated for each type of language on each scale. Canonical discriminant function evaluated at group means and the percent of grouped cases correctly classified were calculated as an indication of the efficacy of the function. The canonical discriminant function evaluated at group means is comparable to the correlation between the set of continuous variables (23 scales) and the nominal variable (deferential/non-deferential language).

A stepwise discriminant analysis was performed on the combined data in order to identify the stable differences perceived by all raters regardless of issue or gender. The method used was that which adds one variable at a time to the discriminant function so as to determine a reduced set of variables which is as efficient or nearly as efficient as the total set. Efficiency is defined as the maximization of the RAO-V. STATISTIC. Since the difference in RAO-V produced by adding any given variable is distributed as X^2 with one degree of freedom, it provides a means of testing the statistical significance of the contribution of each scale to the predictive power of the discriminant function. Thus the value of RAO-V at each step,

the difference in the value of RAO-V produced by adding each new variable, and the statistical probability of each of those differences were calculated and displayed.[1]

Before entering any of the scales into the stepwise solution, F values were calculated for each scale. The program then selected the scale with the highest F value and entered it into the analysis first. All the variance attributable to that scale was removed and new F values for the remaining scales accounting for the remaining variance were calculated. Then the program selected the scale out of the remaining scales with the highest F value and entered it into the analysis. This procedure continued until none of the scales attained or exceeded an F value of 1.0 (SPSS subprogram Discriminant, Stepwise default option, RAO-V).

The best indicator of the strength of an individual scale in discriminating between deferential and non-deferential language is probably the F value of that scale before the stepwise solution is begun and thus before any variance has been removed from the matrix. Those F values were calculated and are displayed.

Results

We want to make it clear at the onset that due to the large size of the sample this study was very sensitive to, and therefore, capable of detecting small differences and relationships. The actual number of subjects was 1262, but since each subject rated two deferential and two non-deferential language styles, the effective sample size was 2524. Consequently, when F tests were calculated between the deferential and non-deferential conditions for each of the twenty-three variables as part of the stepwise multiple discriminant analyses, twenty of the twenty-three differences were statistically significant beyond the .01 level (critical F value = 6.64). Exciting as that may be, it is unlikely that all the statistically significant

differences and relationships are theoretically significant. Consequently we'll pay special attention to the size of the differences and the strength of the relationships in order to evaluate their theoretical significance.

Five direct discriminant analyses were used to determine the extent to which raters' perceptions of deferential language styles differed depending on the issue or the sex of the rater. See Table 1 for the summary of these five direct discriminant analyses. This table displays each scale and its corresponding standardized canonical discriminant function coefficient. Each coefficient represents the relative importance of each scale to that function. We have displayed only those scales with canonical discriminant function coefficients which meet or exceed .10. We selected .10 to point up only those scales which indicate at least a moderate degree of importance in discriminating between deferential and non-deferential language styles.

Table 2 displays group means for each type of language on each scale that meets or exceeds .10. The means allow us to determine the direction of raters' perceptions of deferential language users and non-deferential language users on each scale.

Tables 3 and 4 display the results of the stepwise discriminant analyses performed on the combined data. Table 3 displays the F values for each scale before beginning the stepwise procedure. Table 4 displays the reduced set of sixteen scales which correctly classify grouped cases 82.39% of the time. Note that the percent of grouped cases correctly classified is at least 80% of all analyses. Ten of the sixteen scales make a significant contribution to the predictive power of the discriminant function at the .01 level. These ten scales closely correspond to those scales identified in the direct discriminant analyses with a canonical discriminant function coefficient of at least .10.

Table 5 displays group means calculated for each type of language on each of the ten scales identified in the stepwise discriminant analysis.

Discussion

First, men and women do seem to perceive deferential language users somewhat differently. The similarities however seem to outweigh the differences. Second, there is strong support that raters perceive "discussants" who use language having deferential characteristics as more submissive, less assertive and less willing to take a stand. Third, deferential language users are perceived to be significantly less believable in the statistical sense, although we have some question about whether the difference is large enough to be of theoretical significance. Fourth, Lakoff's speculations that deferential language users are more likely to be perceived as feminine does seem to be supported by our data. Our data suggest that masculinity is a characteristic attributed to those who have been judged as dominant rather than dominance being the characteristic attributed to those who have already been judged as masculine, at least in these conditions.

The results of individual direct discriminant analyses demonstrates that raters' perceptions of deferential and non-deferential language styles do differ to some extent attributable to sex of the rater. Again we can see that the scales with the higher canonical discriminant function coefficients indicate that both male and female raters perceive deferential language users to be more submissive, less assertive, less willing to take a stand, and more caring.

Some statistically significant differences did appear in the analyses for male and female raters. From examination of the tables one can see that men differ from women in that they seem to perceive deferential language users as more friendly, and they are more willing to share the opinion of the deferential language user. Women differ from men in their perceptions of deferential language users as they see deferential language users as more

sincere and more honest, and yet are less likely to accept the deferential language users' opinions in general. We could speculate about the personality differences implied by these perceptual differences between the sexes but we'll leave that to others because, frankly, we are not that certain that they may not be too small to be of theoretical significance.

The ten scales which contribute significantly ($p>.01$) to the overall predictive capability of the discriminant function for differentiating between deferential and non-deferential language styles seem to fall into three categories: (1) a power category consisting of the dominant/submissive, assertive/not assertive, and willing/not willing to take a stand scales; (2) a personal warmth category comprised of the friendly/unfriendly, caring/uncaring and sincere/insincere scales, and (3) a believability category comprised of the I would/would not take this person's advice, I was/was not persuaded by this person, and honest/dishonest scales. Additionally, we find that raters to some extent do associate deferential language style with femininity as indicated by differences on the masculine/feminine scale.

It does not appear, however, that the masculine/feminine scale is as important in differentiating deferential and non-deferential language styles as those scales which we have labeled as power and personal warmth. The evidence for this conclusion can be seen by examining the F values of these scales before the stepwise analysis was begun. (See Table 3). Notice that the dominant/submissive scale has an F value of 1293.7, whereas raters' perception of differences on the masculinity/femininity scale seems to be less important ($F=447.8$). Of course, if the discussant had been a real person, physically observable to the raters, the sex judgment would have been made first and might well have assumed greater importance.

Up to this point we have focused on the question of statistical significance. Statistically all ten scales are significant ($p>.01$) in that they

contribute to the overall significance of the predictive capability of the discriminant function. We have now, however, addressed the question of the theoretical significance of each of these scales. One way of examining the theoretical significance of each scale is to look at the group mean differences on each scale (See Table 5). Upon examination of the mean differences, we believe that the following scales with a group mean difference of one or more scale points appear to be the most important in discriminating between language styles: dominant/submissive (MD=2.0), caring/uncaring (MD=1.0), assertive/not assertive (MD=2.0) and definitely masculine/definitely feminine (MD=1.0). Those scales most clearly associated with believability do not appear to be as useful as indicators of differences in language style. They do differentiate between language styles in that they are statistically significant, but the group mean differences are so small as to call into question their utility. The group mean differences for these scales are: I would/would not take this person's advice (.2), I was/was not persuaded by this person (.3), and honest/dishonest (.5). The sincere/insincere scale also displayed a small group mean difference of .6.

Conclusion

This study attempted to examine characteristics used by male and female raters to differentiate between deferential and non-deferential language styles, The effect of deferential language style on raters' perceptions of believability and the extent to which deferential language style is associated with femininity. We discovered that raters were more likely to perceive users of deferential language style as having less power but more personal warmth and found that to be consistent for both male and female raters. Choice of language style does have an effect on believability which is statistically significant, but does not appear to be great enough to have much theoretical significance. Raters do appear to be associating

deferential language style with femininity; however, the relative importance of this association in their decision-making hierarchy requires further investigation.

FOOTNOTE

[1] Direct and stepwise discriminant analyses were performed at the University of California at Davis, using SPSS sub-program Discriminant. For a detailed discussion of this sub-program including available options and statistics, see Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, second edition. Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner and Bent, 1975.

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Table 1

Direct and Discriminant Analyses: Rater Sex and Topic

Scale	Rater Sex		TOPIC		
	Male	Female	Abortion	Job	Solar
Willing/Not willing to take a stand	-.46	-.38	-.39	-.31	-.50
Assertive/Not Assertive	-.20	-.24	*	-.25	-.24
Definitely masculine/Definitely feminine	-.11	*	*	-.14	*
Dominant/Submissive	-.22	-.36	-.40	-.36	-.14
Caring/Uncaring	.12	.28	.40	.16	*
Friendly/Unfriendly	.34	*	.19	.23	.21
Intelligent/Stupid	*	*	*	.10	*
Well informed/Poorly informed	*	*	*	.12	.21
Sincere/Insincere	*	.17	.14	*	.15
Honest/Dishonest	*	-.21	-.25	-.10	*
Competent/Incompetent	-.13	*	-.11	-.20	*
Similar/Dissimilar	*	*	*	-.11	*
I would/would not want to be friends with this person	*	.12	.16	*	*
I do/do not share this person's opinion	.13	*	*	*	*
I do/do not trust this person	*	*	.15	*	.10
I would/would not accept this person's opinion in general	*	.12	*	*	.20
I would/would not take this person's advice	.13	.15	.16	*	.14
I did/did not believe this person	*	*	*	.23	*
I was/was not persuaded by this person	-.16	-.19	-.16	*	-.30
Reliable/Unreliable	*	*	*	*	.10

*Do not meet or exceed .10.

Table 2

Group Means of Discriminating Scales by Rater Sex

Scale	Group	Male	Female
Willing to take a stand/ Not willing to take a stand	1	1.9	1.7
	2	4.0	4.0
Assertive/Not assertive	1	2.6	2.3
	2	4.5	4.6
Masculine/Feminine	1	2.9	3.3
	2	4.2	4.1
Dominant/Submissive	1	2.6	2.5
	2	4.6	4.7
Caring/Uncaring	1	3.9	3.9
	2	3.0	2.9
Friendly/Unfriendly	1	4.0	4.0
	2	2.8	2.9
Intelligent/Stupid	1	3.3	3.2
	2	3.3	3.3
Well informed/Poorly informed	1	3.5	3.5
	2	3.5	3.8
Sincere/Insincere	1	3.2	3.1
	2	2.8	2.7
Honest/Dishonest	1	3.2	3.1
	2	3.0	2.8
Competent/Incompetent	1	3.5	3.5
	2	3.9	3.7
Similar/Dissimilar	1	4.3	4.5
	2	4.2	4.0
I would/Would not want to be friends with this person	1	4.0	4.0
	2	3.6	3.4
I do/Do not share this person's opinion	1	4.3	4.3
	2	4.0	4.0
I do/Do not trust this person	1	4.1	4.2
	2	3.6	3.5
I would/Would not accept this person's opinion in general	1	4.0	4.1
	2	3.8	3.8
I would/Would not take this person's advice	1	4.4	4.4
	2	4.2	4.2
I did/Did not believe this person	1	4.1	4.0
	2	3.9	3.7
I was/Was not persuaded by this person	1	4.4	4.5
	2	4.6	4.7
Reliable/Unreliable	1	3.7	3.6
	2	3.6	3.6

Table 3

F Values for Language Differences on All Variables

Scale	F value
I was/was not persuaded by this person.	6.9
I did/did not believe this person.	11.2
I would/would not take this person's advice.	5.5
I would/would not accept this person's opinions in general.	19.6
I do/do not trust this person.	78.9
I do/do not share this person's opinion.	14.9
I would/would not want to be friends with this person.	82.1
Similar/Dissimilar (to me)	15.3
Competent/Incompetent	25.2
Educated/Not educated	9.2
Honest/Disnonest	26.5
Sincere/Insincere	51.9
Well informed/Poorly informed	13.1
Intelligent/Stupid	1.1
Good/Bad	52.2
Reliable/Unreliable	.9
Friendly/Unfriendly	523.2
Caring/Uncaring	254.0
Emotional/Calm	152.8
Dominant/Submissive	1293.7
Definitely masculine/Definitely feminine	447.8
Assertive/Not assertive	1100.6
Willing/Not willing to take a stand	1193.7

Critical F value = 6.64 ($p < .01$)

Table 4

Summary Table for Stepwise Discriminant Analysis

Scale	RAO's V	Change in V	Sig.
Dominant/Submissive	1294.	1294.	0.0000
Friendly/Unfriendly	1585.	291.8	0.0000
Willing/Not willing to take a stand	1829.	243.6	0.0000
Caring/Uncaring	1882.	52.55	0.0000
Assertive/Not assertive	1914.	31.92	0.0000
Masculine/Feminine	1938.	24.60	0.0000
I would/Would not take this person's advice	1958.	19.62	0.0000
I was/Was not persuaded by this person	1968.	10.66	0.0011
Honest/Dishonest	1975.	6.44	0.0111
Sincere/Insincere	1985.	9.74	0.0018
I would/Would not want to be friends with this person	1991.	6.00	0.0143
Emotional/Calm	1996.	5.37	0.0205
Competent/Incompetent	2002.	5.65	0.0175
I did/Did not believe this person	2006.	4.78	0.0289
I would/Would not accept this person's opinions in general	2009.	3.09	0.0787
Reliable/Unreliable	2011.	1.92	0.1660

Classification Results

Canonical discriminant functions evaluated at group means:

Group		
	1	.89093
	2	-.89518

Actual Group	N of Cases	Predicted Group Membership 1	2
1	1264	1068(84.5%)	196 (15.5%)
2	1285	248(19.7%)	1010 (80.3%)
ungrouped	2	0	2

Percent of grouped cases correctly classified: 82.39%

Table 5

Group Means of Discriminating Scales (Stepwise Analysis)

Scale	Group	Means
Dominant/Submissive	1	2.6
	2	4.6
Friendly/Unfriendly	1	4.1
	2	2.8
Willing/Not willing to take a stand	1	1.8
	2	4.0
Caring/Uncaring	1	3.9
	2	2.9
Assertive/Not assertive	1	2.5
	2	4.5
Masculine/Feminine	1	3.1
	2	4.1
I would/Would not take this person's advice	1	4.4
	2	4.2
I was/Was not persuaded by this person	1	4.4
	2	4.7
Honest/Dishonest	1	3.2
	2	2.9
Sincere/Insincere	1	3.2
	2	2.8
I would/Would not want to be friends with this person	1	4.0
	2	3.5
Emotional/Calm	1	2.9
	2	3.7
Competent/Incompetent	1	3.5
	2	3.8
I did/Did not believe this person	1	4.1
	2	3.8
I would/Would not accept this person's opinions in general	1	4.1
	2	3.8
Reliable/Unreliable	1	3.6
	2	3.6